

September 19, 2005 PEOPLE

SURVIVING HELL & HIGH WATER

Braving disease, despair and the loss of everything they knew, Katrina's victims tell amazing tales of tragedy and heroism

Forced to Leave One Child Behind While Giving Birth to Another

ROSEZINA JEFFERSON

Rosezina Jefferson welcomed a new son, Keith, into the world at 4 a.m. on Aug. 31, weighing 8 lbs., 2 oz. But instead of being able to revel in her baby's first moments of life, Jefferson, 26, was consumed with worry about Ashton—the 5-year-old son she had been forced to leave behind in the rapidly rising waters of New Orleans the day before.

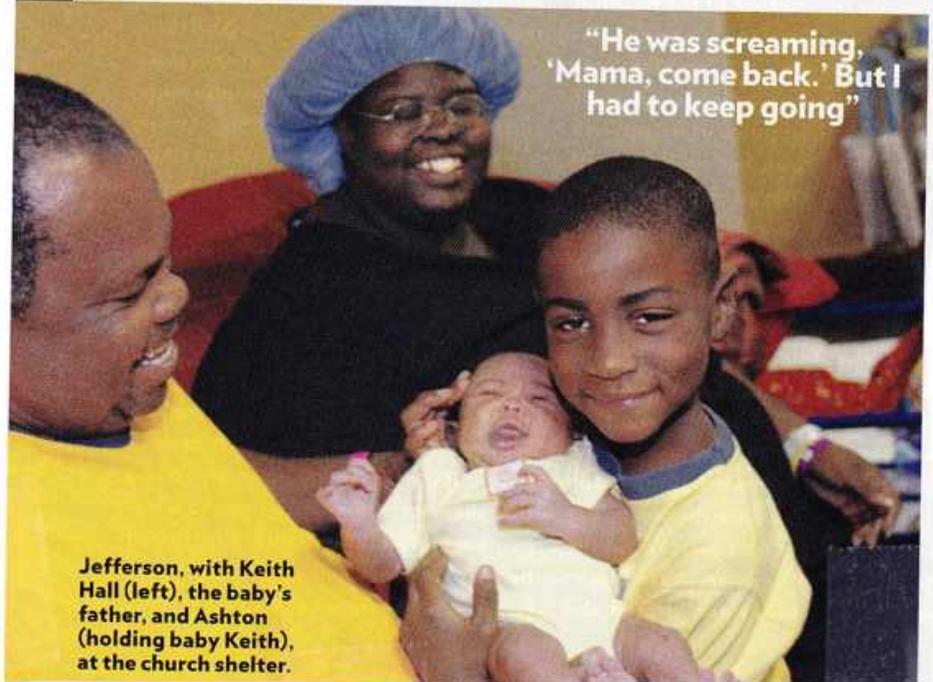
With Rosezina's Sept. 2 due date fast approaching, she and Ashton had left their apartment Sun., Aug. 28, to stay with her friend and Ashton's godmother, Monique Moses, who had agreed to take care of the boy when the time came for Rosezina to give birth. Then Katrina hit. The muddy water had nearly reached the second floor of Moses's two-floor apartment Tuesday morning when Jefferson had her first contraction. Since neither Moses nor Ashton could swim, Jefferson, battling panic and quickening pain, could think of only one way to get help fast: She plunged into the murky floodwaters and swam toward a bridge

three blocks away, where she had heard the Coast Guard was picking people up.

Ashton watched his mother as she stepped off a fire-escape ladder—a memory that would haunt her as she swam for safety. “He was screaming, ‘Mama, come back,’” Jefferson says. “But I had to keep going.” After half an hour, just shy of the Coast Guard's temporary outpost, she was airlifted to dry ground and taken by ambulance to Woman's Hospital in Baton Rouge. There, in the throes of labor, she wondered if her son was alive: “I was watching the news and saw how bad it was. I was really scared.”

Three agonizing days passed before Jefferson got word: Ashton and Moses were safe at the Judson Baptist Church shelter in Walker, La., 20 miles north of Baton Rouge. On Saturday the family was reunited, and Jefferson gave Ashton an extra-tight hug. “I asked him, did he have faith I'd find him?” Jefferson says. “He just held my hand and smiled.”

Photograph by NANETTE MARTIN



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Jefferson, with Keith Hall (left), the baby's father, and Ashton (holding baby Keith), at the church shelter.

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